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World Malaria Day Marked in Liberia, Other PMI Countries

FrontLines - June 2009

By Ashley Peterson Allen

Yemeh Smith smiled nervously as she received a rapid diagnostic test (RDT) for malaria in rural Todee District, Liberia.

The gloved volunteer sanitized Smith's middle finger, then pricked it and deposited a drop of blood into the testing mechanism to wait 15 minutes for the result.

Smith falls into the category of those most vulnerable to malaria—women who are pregnant and children under the age of 5. She tested negative, a result she attributes to prevention information she received from a community health volunteer (CHV) who visited her home and health professionals at the local clinic who have provided treatment to help prevent malaria during her pregnancy.

The test and special treatment Smith received are two of several weapons in the arsenal to fight malaria provided by the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), led by USAID in partnership with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, country health ministries, and an array of NGOs and civic organizations.

In Liberia, malaria is the leading cause of sickness and death, and perpetuates the cycle of poverty as people infected often miss work or school. Over the last year, PMI distributed 197,000 long-lasting insecticide-treated mosquito nets, and purchased another 430,000 for distribution through 2009 in the country.



VIDEO: Flash video describes the funding process for the President's Malaria Initiative.

[Click to view video.](#)

USAID also sponsored training in malaria case management for 395 health workers in clinics that received 425,000 RDTs and over 1.6 million doses of antimalarial drugs. The numbers will increase to over 1,000 health workers, 850,000 tests, and over 2 million treatments by the end of 2009. Indoor residual spraying, a fourth element in the anti-malaria arsenal, begins in June in 25,000 households.

A major malaria-related concern in Liberia is proper diagnosis, which RDTs help facilitate.

Health experts want to avoid situations where all fevers are treated as malaria and resources are wasted, while ensuring that those infected receive proper treatment from trained staff in clinics.

PMI is just one year into its three-year operation in Liberia, but a small survey of 146 households in Bomi County showed that over 60 percent possessed mosquito nets, though just under 40 percent hung them properly.

In rural districts like Todee, CHVs walk along dirt roads up to three or four hours to villages where they share the malaria message with village leaders and households. One volunteer explained that before the awareness campaign, many people thought malaria was caused by sucking oranges, eating bad mangoes, or drinking too much beer.

Others resisted using nets, saying they were too hot or hurt their skin, and sold them or used them improperly to make curtains, to strain food, or to fish.

On World Malaria Day, which fell on April 25 this year, countries hard hit by the disease joined advocacy groups and health agencies to highlight malaria's impact and the programs to eradicate the disease which kills about 1 million people every year.

In Todee District, where Smith and others were tested that day, school children donned World Malaria Day T-shirts and paraded through the villages. They sang songs about the day's theme, Counting Malaria Out, and warned, "Don't let the mosquito bite—it may give you malaria!"

Read more about World Malaria Day at www.pmi.gov/news/wmd_09.html . ?



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FrontLines is published by the Bureau for Legislative and Public Affairs
U.S. Agency for International Development

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Last Updated on: June 08, 2009